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Let's subsidize
art, culture—VII

Building educated audience

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"Culture has become so widespread as to have, for most practical purposes, attenuated itself out of existence."

—John Simon

At the start of this series the suggestion was made that the so-called Cultural Explosion is a bomb, that it has, in fact, no substantial reality, that the phrase itself is nothing more than a neatly-wrapped myth.

In our age of mass communication the difficulties of separating publicity from, say, truth (loaded word), may be utterly impossible. Or, at best, a waste of time. And yet many of us work on the classic assumption that time, finally, will distinguish schlock from genius. Somehow good art will triumph over bad, perhaps.

We have, on one side, an IBM warehouse of facts which prove (or seem to prove) a broad interest and involvement in culture. We have, too, the facts fleshed out with a neat, comforting, ennobling fantasy: that human aspiration, in our dry, denuded universe, is roughly like the thirst of a man struggling through the burning desert. The soul must be slaked with art; the spirit demands it. If this is correct, if the image is, indeed, more than self-serving praise of Modern Man, we may well be in the midst of a Cultural Explosion.

It seems to me, however, that what we have before us is a sputter of propaganda, not a cultural explosion at all but, instead, a revolution, a change in attitude about the arts in general. And I don't mean simply the often-repeated notion that the arts no longer belong solely to the landed gentry, or, in Massachusetts, to what someone referred to as the Concord-Weston-Lincoln axis.

Behind the propaganda is the theory that a great democracy (all men are created equal) must be democratic about everything including art. This raises serious questions

The fact that all men are not created equal hardly bothers the proselytizers for culture, or that appreciation, the ability to be receptive, is largely dependent upon education and-or exposure. And so, in this swirling cultural revolution, we have the man-in-the-street blankly staring at abstract art in the display window of his favorite Five Cents Savings Bank.

We have him threading his way through the carnival atmosphere of something like Winterfest, which confuses culture, commerce and politics in a kind of muddled-media. We have him, in short, hammered by publicity into the belief that he can experience anything, even art, if only he has the leisure time—which he has—the interest which he may not have but pretends to.

What is needed, more than anything else in this cultural carnival, is education. Spreading the word is one thing; defining worth is another. And here, I suggest, is one of the crucial problems before the state's Council on the Arts and Humanities.

John Simon believes that our century has been cheapened by pseudo-culture creating a "knowledgeably mindless mediocrity." Dwight Macdonald speaks disparagingly of "mid-cult." Emily Coleman has written: "... whether this awakening of public interest in the arts booms into vigorous, creative prosperity or into a proliferation of culture centers inhabited by 'culture-vultures' is a moot question."

If culture has become so widespread that it is slowly but surely losing its meaning, here again is where the Council must educate and define standards. In this characterless age in which we live, in which we find ourselves struggling for meaning, art must be protected whether in the ascendancy or in decline.

END OF SERIES

Handwritten note: This would not and should not be taken as a reflection on any individual, magazine, publisher, or writer. It is written by Kevin Kelly, Dec 14-1978.

